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Article

From Disaster Volunteering to Community-Based Practice: A Qualitative Case Study of Relational Participation Through a Local Camellia (Tsubaki) Project

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Abstract

This study examines how social participation develops and becomes sustained through practice, focusing on a qualitative case study of a community initiative centered on a local camellia (tsubaki) project in post-disaster Japan. Drawing on the experience of an individual whose engagement began with disaster-related volunteering following the Great East Japan Earthquake, the study explores how participation evolved into long-term community-based practice. Previous research has largely conceptualized volunteering as an activity driven by individual motivation or values. However, less attention has been paid to how participation is formed, transformed, and sustained through ongoing relational processes. To address this gap, this study employs a qualitative case study approach, analyzing interviews, field observations, and activity records related to the development of a community-based camellia project. The findings reveal three key insights. First, participation did not originate from a clear or stable motivation but gradually emerged through situational involvement and interpersonal relationships. Second, the continuity of engagement was shaped not by individual intention alone but by the accumulation of relationships and the emergence of role recognition within the community. Third, the camellia project functioned as a mediating resource that materialized social participation, enabling diverse actors to engage through shared practice. These findings suggest that volunteering should be understood as a dynamic and relational process rather than a fixed expression of altruistic intent. By illustrating how disaster-related engagement evolved into a sustainable form of community practice through a local resource, this study contributes to the literature on community welfare, civic participation, and practice-based social engagement.

Keywords: volunteering; social participation; community-based practice; Camellia (Tsubaki) project; disaster volunteering; relational processes; practice-based learning

1. Introduction

1.1. Background: Social Participation and Volunteering in an Aging Society

Japan is facing rapid demographic aging and population decline, which have intensified concerns regarding social isolation, weakening community ties, and the sustainability of local welfare systems. In this context, citizen participation and volunteering have increasingly been positioned as essential components of community-based welfare and social support (Abe, 2008; Niki, 2022).

Previous studies have demonstrated that social participation contributes not only to community sustainability but also to individual well-being. In particular, engagement in volunteer activities has been associated with improved psychological health, social connectedness, and a sense of purpose, especially among older adults (Anderson et al., 2014). These findings have reinforced policy interest in promoting citizen involvement as a supplement to formal welfare systems.

However, despite this growing attention, a persistent challenge remains: many volunteer activities are short-lived, episodic, or dependent on extraordinary events such as natural disasters.

Sustaining participation over time and transforming short-term engagement into long-term community involvement remains a central issue in both research and practice (Whittaker et al., 2015).

1.2. Limitations of Existing Volunteer Motivation Studies

Research on volunteering has traditionally focused on individual motivations. The functional approach proposed by Clary et al. (1998) has been particularly influential, identifying multiple motivational dimensions such as values, understanding, social connection, and self-enhancement. Subsequent studies have further demonstrated that motivations are linked to volunteer retention and satisfaction (Omoto & Snyder, 1995).

While these studies have provided important insights, they share a common limitation: they primarily conceptualize motivation as an antecedent of participation. In other words, individuals are assumed to possess certain motivations prior to engagement, which then lead them to volunteer.

Recent reviews, however, suggest that such an approach may overlook the dynamic and relational nature of volunteering. Hustinx et al. (2010) argue that contemporary volunteering is increasingly characterized by flexibility, episodic participation, and weak institutional attachment. In this context, motivation cannot be understood solely as a stable personal attribute but must be examined as something that evolves through practice.

This limitation becomes particularly salient in post-disaster contexts. Research on disaster volunteering indicates that many individuals participate without clear prior intentions and that their roles often change as recovery processes unfold (Whittaker et al., 2015). These findings suggest that volunteering should be analyzed not only as an outcome of motivation but also as a process through which meaning and commitment are gradually constructed.

1.3. Volunteering, Publicness, and Relational Practice

Beyond individual motivation, recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of relational and institutional contexts in shaping civic engagement. Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital highlights how trust and networks enable collective action, while Wuthnow (1998) emphasizes the growing prevalence of "loose connections" in modern civic life, characterized by flexible and non-hierarchical participation.

In the Japanese context, scholars have similarly noted that civic engagement often emerges not through formal organizations but through informal, relational networks (Nishikawa, 2007). Such forms of participation challenge conventional distinctions between public and private spheres, suggesting that publicness is not given but constructed through interaction.

Fung (2015) further argues that democratic governance increasingly depends on participatory practices that emerge from everyday interactions rather than institutional design alone. This perspective is particularly relevant to community-based welfare activities, where formal authority is limited and legitimacy is often generated through trust and sustained engagement.

From this standpoint, volunteering can be understood as a relational practice in which individuals gradually acquire roles, responsibilities, and a sense of public commitment through repeated interaction with others.

1.4. Practice-Based Knowledge and the Formation of Commitment

To analyze such processes, this study draws on theories of practice-based knowledge. Schön (1983) conceptualized professional knowledge as something produced through reflection-in-action rather than the application of predefined rules. This insight has been extended in participatory action research, which emphasizes the co-production of knowledge through practice and dialogue (McTaggart & Nixon, 2018).

Within this framework, engagement in community activities is not merely an expression of pre-existing values but a site where meanings, identities, and responsibilities are negotiated. This

perspective aligns with care ethics, which views care not as a unidirectional act but as a relational process embedded in social contexts (Tronto, 1993).

Such theoretical perspectives are particularly useful for analyzing volunteering in aging societies, where support activities often blur the boundaries between professional care, informal help, and civic participation.

1.5. Research Gap and Purpose of the Study

Although prior research has examined volunteering from motivational, organizational, and policy perspectives, several gaps remain.

First, few studies have examined how volunteering evolves over time from initial, often tentative participation into sustained social practice.

Second, existing studies tend to focus on organizational or institutional settings, paying less attention to informal, community-based trajectories.

Third, the relationship between disaster-related volunteering and later community engagement remains underexplored, particularly in the Japanese context.

To address these gaps, this study examines a single case of a community practitioner who began with disaster-related volunteer work and later developed sustained engagement in elderly support and community activities. By tracing this process longitudinally, the study aims to clarify how motivation, role recognition, and public commitment are gradually formed through practice.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does volunteer engagement evolve from temporary participation to sustained community practice?
2. How are motivation and role identity formed through relational interactions?
3. How does individual practice contribute to the emergence of public-oriented activity?

Through this analysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of volunteering as a dynamic, relational, and practice-based process, offering implications for community welfare policy and participatory governance.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Volunteer Motivation Research and Its Limitations

Volunteer motivation has long been a central theme in the study of civic engagement. Among the most influential frameworks is the functional approach proposed by Clary et al. (1998), which conceptualizes volunteering as motivated by multiple functions, including values, understanding, social connection, self-enhancement, and career development. This framework has been widely applied to explain why individuals choose to participate in volunteer activities.

Building on this line of research, Omoto and Snyder (1995) demonstrated that motivation and satisfaction play a critical role in sustaining long-term volunteer involvement. Their findings contributed significantly to understanding volunteer retention and commitment.

However, these studies also share notable limitations. First, motivation is generally treated as a relatively stable factor that precedes participation. Second, little attention is paid to how motivation, roles, and meanings change through continued engagement in practice. In other words, volunteering is often analyzed as an outcome of motivation rather than as a process through which motivation itself is formed.

More recent studies have challenged this static perspective. Hustinx et al. (2010) argue that contemporary volunteering has become increasingly fluid, episodic, and individualized, making it difficult to explain using traditional models based on long-term organizational commitment. From this viewpoint, volunteering should be understood as a dynamic practice shaped by context and experience rather than as a fixed behavioral choice.

This limitation becomes particularly evident in the context of disaster volunteering. Research has shown that many disaster volunteers participate without clearly articulated intentions and that

their roles often evolve through engagement with affected communities (Whittaker et al., 2015). These findings suggest that volunteering should be analyzed as a process of meaning-making rather than merely as an expression of prior motivation.

2.2. Disaster Volunteering and the Sustainability of Participation

In Japan, volunteer research expanded significantly following large-scale disasters such as the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and the Great East Japan Earthquake. These events prompted unprecedented levels of citizen participation and brought renewed attention to the role of volunteers in disaster response and recovery.

Sakurai (2018) points out that disaster volunteering is characterized by a low threshold for participation and a high degree of spontaneity. Many individuals join without clear expectations or long-term commitments. Similarly, Whittaker et al. (2015) emphasize that while disaster volunteering enables rapid mobilization, it often fails to translate into sustained civic engagement.

These studies highlight an important paradox: disaster volunteering serves as an entry point into civic participation, yet only a small proportion of participants continue their involvement beyond the immediate recovery phase. The mechanisms through which temporary engagement evolves into sustained community practice remain insufficiently explored.

This study addresses this gap by examining how disaster-related volunteer experiences are reinterpreted over time and how they contribute to long-term involvement in community-based activities.

2.3. Publicness, Civic Participation, and Relational Perspectives

To better understand volunteering as a social practice, it is necessary to consider broader theories of publicness and civic engagement. Putnam (2000) argues that social capital—particularly trust and networks—plays a crucial role in enabling collective action and sustaining democratic life. However, he also notes the decline of traditional forms of civic participation.

Wuthnow (1998) further suggests that contemporary civic engagement is increasingly characterized by loose and flexible forms of association rather than stable organizational membership. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding community-based volunteer activities that operate outside formal institutional frameworks.

In the Japanese context, Nishikawa (2007) emphasizes that publicness is not imposed by institutions but emerges through everyday interactions and shared practices. This view resonates strongly with community welfare settings, where informal relationships often serve as the foundation for collective action.

Fung (2015) extends this argument by suggesting that democratic governance depends not only on institutional design but also on participatory processes through which citizens actively construct public values. From this perspective, volunteering can be seen as a form of public practice through which civic responsibility and collective meaning are produced.

2.4. Practice-Based Knowledge and the Ethics of Care

This study also draws on theories of practice-based knowledge to conceptualize volunteering as a process of learning and transformation. Schön (1983) argues that professional knowledge emerges through reflection-in-action rather than the application of predefined rules. This insight is particularly relevant for community-based activities, where situations are complex and unpredictable.

McTaggart and Nixon (2018) further develop this idea within the framework of participatory action research, emphasizing that knowledge is co-produced through collaboration between researchers and practitioners. This approach highlights the importance of dialogue, reflexivity, and shared learning in social practice.

In addition, the ethics of care provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding volunteer activities. Tronto (1993) conceptualizes care as a relational and reciprocal practice rather than a unidirectional act of assistance. This perspective underscores the interdependence between caregivers and care receivers and offers a normative framework for analyzing community-based support activities.

2.5. Theoretical Framework of This Study

Based on the above literature, this study adopts an integrative theoretical framework consisting of three key perspectives.

First, volunteer motivation is understood not as a fixed antecedent but as something that is formed and transformed through practice.

Second, civic participation is conceptualized as a relational process in which publicness emerges through interaction rather than institutional design.

Third, drawing on theories of practice-based knowledge and care ethics, this study focuses on how meaning, responsibility, and role identity are generated through continued engagement in social practice.

By integrating these perspectives, this study aims to clarify how disaster-related volunteer experiences develop into sustained community involvement. Through an in-depth qualitative case analysis, it seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of volunteering as a dynamic, relational, and practice-based phenomenon, thereby offering theoretical and practical implications for community welfare and civic participation research.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how volunteer participation evolves from initial engagement to sustained community-based practice. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for capturing the dynamic and processual nature of volunteering, which cannot be adequately explained through cross-sectional or quantitative methods alone.

Rather than treating volunteering as a discrete behavioral outcome, this study conceptualizes it as an evolving social practice shaped by interaction, reflection, and changing role expectations. Accordingly, an in-depth case study allows for close examination of how meaning, motivation, and commitment emerge over time within a specific social context.

The case selected for this study represents a typical, rather than exceptional, example of post-disaster volunteer engagement in Japan. By focusing on an ordinary case rather than an extreme or exemplary one, the analysis aims to illuminate mechanisms that are potentially transferable to other community settings.

3.2. Case Selection

The subject of this study (hereafter referred to as “Participant A”) is an individual who initially engaged in volunteer activities following the Great East Japan Earthquake and later became involved in long-term community-based support for older adults.

Participant A first participated in disaster-related listening and support activities without any formal affiliation or long-term intention. Subsequently, through involvement in research-related activities on aging and community support, Participant A initiated informal assistance for older adults, particularly in the area of digital device use. This later developed into organized community activities conducted through a voluntary association.

The case was selected for three reasons. First, it represents a common trajectory observed among disaster volunteers who initially participate on a temporary basis. Second, the participant’s activities gradually expanded beyond disaster response into routine community support. Third, the case offers

rich empirical material for examining how volunteer roles and motivations evolve through relational processes.

3.3. Data Collection

Multiple sources of qualitative data were used to ensure analytical depth and credibility.

1. Semi-structured interviews

Multiple interviews were conducted with Participant A over an extended period. These interviews focused on motivations for participation, experiences of role change, interactions with others, and reflections on the meaning of continued engagement.

2. Document analysis

Documents related to the participant's activities—including project descriptions, activity reports, and public materials—were collected and analyzed to trace the development of the activities over time.

3. Participant observation

The author maintained ongoing engagement with the field and recorded observational notes related to meetings, interactions, and community activities. These notes were used to contextualize interview data and identify patterns of practice.

The triangulation of these data sources enabled a more comprehensive understanding of both subjective experiences and observable practices.

3.4. Analytical Procedure

Data analysis followed an interpretive qualitative approach. First, interview transcripts and documents were coded thematically, focusing on changes in motivation, role perception, and relationships with others.

Second, these codes were organized chronologically to identify key phases in the participant's engagement trajectory. Particular attention was paid to moments of transition, such as shifts in responsibility, expansion of activities, and changes in self-identification.

Third, the emergent themes were interpreted in light of the theoretical framework outlined in the previous section, especially concepts related to practice-based knowledge, relational publicness, and the ethics of care.

Rather than seeking causal generalization, the analysis aimed at analytical generalization—clarifying processes and mechanisms that may be applicable to similar contexts.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from the participant prior to data collection, and all identifying information was anonymized to protect privacy.

The author had prior professional involvement with the participant's activities; therefore, particular care was taken to distinguish analytical interpretation from personal involvement. Reflexive memos were used throughout the research process to minimize bias and ensure analytical transparency.

Given that the study focuses on community activities rather than sensitive personal data, it was deemed to fall within the scope of minimal-risk research. Nonetheless, all descriptions were carefully reviewed to avoid unintended identification of individuals or organizations.

3.6. Summary

This chapter outlined the qualitative research design employed in this study. By adopting a case study approach and drawing on multiple data sources, the research aims to capture the dynamic and relational nature of volunteering as it unfolds over time.

The next section presents the empirical analysis, detailing how Participant A's engagement evolved from disaster volunteering to sustained community practice, and how motivation, roles, and public commitment were gradually constructed through experience.

4. Empirical Analysis

4.1. Engagement in Post-Disaster Support and the Point of Departure

— Between Institutional Frameworks and Personal Practice —

Participant A's involvement in social activities began with post-disaster support work following the Great East Japan Earthquake. However, A did not initially engage as an independent or unaffiliated volunteer. Rather, during the early phase of recovery, A worked as a life-recovery support worker within institutional frameworks provided by private-sector initiatives and public or semi-public organizations.

Specifically, during the first and second years after the disaster, A was involved in support activities through a corporate-led assistance program operated by a health-related equipment company. From his third year onwards, he joined the Japan Overseas Cooperation Association (JOCA) and was involved in support activities in Natori City. In this sense, A's engagement differed from that of spontaneous or informal volunteers, as it was embedded within organized support structures to a certain extent.

At the same time, A's practice cannot be fully understood as merely the execution of institutional roles. Through direct engagement with affected communities, A became increasingly aware that effective support could not be reduced to the provision of material resources or formal systems alone. A particularly influential moment occurred when a staff member of the supporting company remarked that "machines or supplies can be delivered anywhere, but what truly matters is that people are present." This statement left a lasting impression on A and became a guiding principle in shaping subsequent activities.

This realization underscored the idea that disaster support is not primarily about the quantity of aid or the efficiency of systems, but about sustained human presence and relational continuity. Through repeated interactions with disaster survivors, A came to understand support as an ongoing relational practice rather than a temporary intervention.

The selection of Natori as the primary site of engagement further illustrates this point. Although opportunities to work in other affected areas were available, A chose to continue activities in Natori based largely on intuitive judgment and the relationships formed there. This decision was not driven by strategic planning but by a sense of connection and responsibility that emerged through lived experience.

Moreover, A later reflected that this orientation toward support was consistent with values internalized from an early age—specifically, the idea that "those who can help should do so, when they can, in the ways they are able." This perspective framed support not as an exceptional or heroic act, but as an extension of everyday life, and it remained a guiding principle throughout A's subsequent community-based activities.

Taken together, A's early engagement illustrates how social participation can originate within institutional settings while gradually shifting toward a more relational and practice-oriented mode of action. These formative experiences laid the foundation for later developments, including involvement in elderly support and the eventual emergence of the Camellia Project.

4.2. Engagement with Older Adults and the Formation of Problem Awareness

Following the disaster-related activities, A became involved in research and support work related to older adults at a university-affiliated setting. Through this engagement, A encountered a different dimension of social vulnerability, particularly among older individuals living in the community.

A noted that many of the difficulties faced by older adults were not primarily related to the lack of formal services but rather to everyday barriers such as limited digital literacy, social isolation, and reduced access to information. In particular, difficulties in using smartphones and digital devices were found to function as significant obstacles to social participation.

Through these experiences, A gradually developed the perception that support should not be understood as specialized intervention but rather as everyday assistance embedded in ordinary social relationships. At this stage, A still did not identify as a “support provider” in a formal sense. Instead, engagement was characterized by a pragmatic attitude of “doing what one can, within one’s capacity.”

This phase marked a transition from situational volunteering to sustained involvement, driven not by ideology but by accumulated experience and interpersonal encounters.

4.3. Establishment of a Voluntary Organization and Expansion of Activities

Building on this emerging awareness, A began offering informal assistance related to smartphone use among older adults, which eventually developed into organized activities under a voluntary association. Importantly, this development was not guided by a predefined mission or strategic plan. Rather, activities expanded organically in response to requests and needs voiced by community members.

In the early phase, the activities remained small-scale, irregular, and highly flexible. However, through continued engagement, the initiative gradually gained visibility and trust within the community. Collaboration with local actors and organizations further contributed to the expansion of activities beyond individual support toward more community-oriented practices.

A crucial feature of this process is that A did not initially aim to “transform the community” or assume a leadership role. Instead, the expansion of activities occurred as a consequence of responding to emerging expectations and relational demands. This illustrates how community practice can evolve without explicit intention, driven instead by relational dynamics.

4.4. Role Formation Through Relational Interaction

A central finding of this case is that role identity was not predefined but emerged through interaction. Initially, A acted simply as “someone who helps” or “someone who listens.” Over time, however, others began to perceive A as a coordinator or mediator—someone who connects people and resources.

This shift was not the result of formal appointment or institutional authority, but rather the accumulation of trust and repeated interaction. In other words, A did not assume a role; the role gradually took shape through practice.

This process aligns with Tronto’s (1993) concept of care as a relational practice and Schön’s (1983) notion of reflective practice, in which professional and social identities are formed through engagement rather than predefined expertise. Through continued interaction, A’s self-understanding evolved from that of a helper to that of a participant with ongoing responsibility toward the community.

4.5. Development of the Camellia Project: Materializing Practice through a Local Resource

4.5.1. From Accumulated Relationships to Engagement with Local Resources

Following the development of relationship-based practices centered on support for older adults, Participant A’s activities gradually expanded into a new initiative utilizing local resources. The most representative example of this development was the “Camellia Project,” which focused on the use of camellia (tsubaki), a plant naturally growing in the region.

This project did not originate from a predefined business plan or an explicit regional development strategy. Rather, it emerged from ongoing interactions within the community, where conversations repeatedly arose concerning how existing local resources might be utilized and how

people could participate without excessive burden. Through such everyday exchanges, attention gradually turned toward camellia as a potential medium for collective activity.

A key turning point was the encounter with a small local enterprise engaged in processing and distributing locally sourced products (hereafter referred to as Company B). The company possessed practical knowledge related to product development and small-scale distribution and recognized the potential of camellia as a usable regional resource.

Importantly, Participant A did not actively seek to create a new role or initiate a project in a strategic manner. Rather, actions were taken in response to emerging possibilities that arose organically from existing relationships. In this sense, the Camellia Project developed not as a planned intervention but as a relationally driven practice grounded in everyday interactions.

4.5.2. Reconfiguration of Relationships through Camellia as a Mediating Resource

A defining feature of the Camellia Project lies in the role of camellia not merely as an agricultural or commercial product, but as a mediating resource that connected people and organizations.

Through activities such as harvesting, sorting, processing, and utilization, a range of actors became involved, including older residents, users and staff of welfare facilities, local residents, and members of Company B. These relationships were not structured through formal hierarchies or predetermined role assignments. Instead, participation was shaped by what each actor was able and willing to contribute.

For example, older residents engaged in light tasks such as gathering and sorting camellia seeds, welfare facility users participated in simple processing activities, and Company B handled quality control, product development, and distribution. Roles remained flexible and complementary rather than fixed or hierarchical.

Within this process, Participant A did not assume the position of a leader or manager. Instead, A functioned as a mediator who facilitated communication, coordinated relationships, and supported the continuity of activities. This role differed from conventional images of volunteers or coordinators, as it emerged organically through practice rather than being institutionally defined.

4.5.3. The Camellia Project as the Materialization of Social Participation

The significance of the Camellia Project lies in the way it transformed social participation from an abstract concept into a concrete and shared practice. Prior to this stage, A's activities had primarily involved intangible forms of engagement such as listening, relationship-building, and informal support. The introduction of camellia as a tangible resource enabled these activities to become visible, shareable, and collectively sustained.

This process demonstrates that social participation does not arise solely from internal motivation or civic consciousness, but rather takes shape through practice. The presence of a concrete object—the camellia—lowered barriers to participation and made it possible for a wider range of actors to become involved, including those who had previously been regarded primarily as recipients of support.

Moreover, the project gradually incorporated elements of economic circulation, albeit on a small scale. Through product development and limited distribution, the initiative moved beyond a purely welfare-oriented activity and acquired characteristics of a sustainable local practice. In doing so, it demonstrated how social participation can evolve into an activity embedded within the everyday economic and social life of a community.

4.5.4. Summary: The Camellia Project as an Outcome of Relational Participation

In summary, the Camellia Project represents a concrete outcome of Participant A's evolving social participation.

First, it illustrates how engagement that began with disaster-related volunteering gradually developed into community-based practice over time.

Second, it shows that this transformation was not driven by formal planning or institutional design, but by the accumulation of relationships and shared experiences.

Third, by utilizing a local resource as a mediating element, the project enabled social participation to become visible, shareable, and sustainable.

This case demonstrates that social participation is not primarily driven by highly motivated individuals, but rather emerges through the layering of relationships and practices over time. The Camellia Project thus represents a tangible manifestation of how relational processes can give rise to enduring forms of community engagement.

4.6. Summary of Findings

The empirical analysis yields three key insights.

First, participation in volunteer activities does not necessarily originate from strong motivations or clear intentions. Instead, engagement often begins through situational and relational encounters.

Second, the continuity of participation is shaped less by individual motivation than by the accumulation of relationships and the gradual formation of roles within those relationships.

Third, the deepening of social engagement occurs not through formal planning or institutional design but through repeated practice and mutual interaction.

These findings suggest that volunteering and community participation should be understood as relational and processual phenomena rather than as outcomes of individual dispositions. This perspective challenges conventional views that emphasize motivation or organizational structure and instead highlights the importance of lived practice in the formation of sustained civic engagement.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Reconsidering Volunteer Motivation as a Process

The findings of this study challenge conventional understandings of volunteer motivation as a stable, pre-existing individual attribute. Rather than entering volunteer activities with clear intentions or altruistic commitments, Participant A's engagement emerged gradually through experience and interaction. This supports recent critiques of motivation-centered models of volunteering, which argue that participation is often shaped through practice rather than preceding it (Hustinx et al., 2010; Whittaker et al., 2015).

In the present case, initial involvement was triggered not by ideological commitment but by situational exposure and emotional resonance following the disaster. Only through repeated engagement did Participant A develop a sense of purpose, responsibility, and continuity. This suggests that motivation should be conceptualized not as a cause of participation but as an outcome of sustained involvement.

Such a perspective aligns with process-oriented approaches in volunteer studies and provides an important corrective to theories that assume rational or value-driven decision-making at the outset of participation.

5.2. Relational Processes and the Emergence of Publicness

Another key contribution of this study lies in its analysis of how publicness emerges through relational interaction. Rather than being defined by institutional affiliation or formal authority, public engagement in this case developed through repeated encounters, mutual recognition, and the gradual accumulation of trust.

This finding resonates with Putnam's (2000) argument that social capital is generated through networks of reciprocity, as well as with Wuthnow's (1998) observation that contemporary civic engagement often takes flexible and informal forms. It also supports Fung's (2015) claim that democratic participation is not merely a function of institutional design but is actively produced through citizen interaction.

Importantly, Participant A did not initially seek to assume a public role. Instead, publicness emerged as others began to rely on A's continued presence and coordination. This suggests that public engagement should be understood as an emergent property of social relationships rather than as an intentional goal.

5.3. Practice-Based Learning and the Ethics of Care

The case also illustrates how volunteering functions as a site of practice-based learning. In line with Schön's (1983) theory of reflective practice, Participant A's knowledge and identity evolved through action and reflection rather than formal training.

Moreover, the findings are consistent with Tronto's (1993) ethics of care, which conceptualizes care as relational, contextual, and reciprocal. Participant A's role development was shaped not by professional authority but by responsiveness to others' needs and by ongoing relational commitments.

This highlights an important dimension of community-based volunteering: its capacity to generate ethical orientation and social responsibility through lived experience rather than normative instruction. Such a perspective is particularly relevant in aging societies, where informal care and community-based support increasingly supplement formal welfare systems.

5.4. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by reframing volunteering as a dynamic and relational process. It demonstrates that motivation, role identity, and public engagement are not fixed attributes but are constructed through participation over time.

Practically, the findings suggest that policies and programs aimed at promoting civic engagement should place less emphasis on recruiting individuals with strong initial motivation and more emphasis on creating environments that allow for gradual involvement, experimentation, and relationship-building.

In particular, lowering barriers to entry, allowing flexible participation, and recognizing informal contributions may be more effective in fostering sustained engagement than formalized volunteer programs alone.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study is based on a single case, which limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the purpose of the study was analytical rather than statistical generalization, aiming to illuminate mechanisms rather than produce representative claims.

Second, the researcher's proximity to the field may have influenced interpretation, although reflexive measures were taken to minimize bias. Future research could benefit from comparative case studies or longitudinal designs involving multiple participants.

Further studies may also explore how similar processes unfold in different cultural or institutional contexts, as well as how digital technologies mediate contemporary forms of community engagement.

5.6. Conclusions

This study examined how volunteer participation evolved from disaster-related engagement into sustained community-based practice through a qualitative case study. The analysis demonstrated that volunteering is not simply driven by pre-existing motivation but emerges through relational interaction, practice-based learning, and evolving role recognition.

By highlighting the processual and relational nature of volunteering, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of civic engagement in aging societies. It also underscores the importance of

creating social environments that allow individuals to “grow into” participation, rather than expecting commitment to precede involvement.

In doing so, the study offers both theoretical insights and practical implications for community development, volunteer management, and social policy in contemporary societies.

Informed Consent Statement: This study was conducted with the informed consent of the participant, and all analyses were carried out in a manner that ensured anonymity and protected personal information. Although the author had a degree of involvement in the participant’s activities, every effort was made to maintain analytical objectivity throughout the research process.

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